

Hypotheses On The Orphic Circle
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Revision 5
June 2011

Context

From the age of twelve my public life commenced; and anyone who has become acquainted with the severe studies which musical artistes are called upon to pursue in Europe... will scoff at the idea that any leisure could have been afforded me for those metaphysical and scientific studies in which certain of my American friends *confidently affirm* "my youth was absorbed." With the exception of a little dabbling in astrology, pursued under the auspices of merry gipsying parties, I never heard of, much less studied, any "ology" in my life.

Emma Hardinge, "To The Reader", from *Six Lectures On Theology and Nature* (1860)

Once more the agencies of magic must be set in motion to redeem its victims. Call together then, the Orphic Circle, and there you will receive the help you solicit, the guidance necessary for your future action, and the direction we cannot give, but the spirits who govern there can.

Ghost Land (1876) p. 284

When quite young, in fact, before I became acquainted with certain parties who sought me out and professed a desire to observe the somnambulistic tendencies for which I was then remarkable. I found my new associates to be ladies and gentlemen, mostly persons of noble rank, and during a period of several years, I, and many other young persons, assisted at their sessions in the quality of somnambulists, or mesmeric subjects...it was one of their leading regulations never to permit the existence of the society to be known or the members thereof named, until they passed from earth to the higher life. It is in virtue of this last clause that I am at liberty to say that Lord Lytton, the Earl of Stanhope, and Lieut. Morrison (better known as "Zadkiel"), and the author of "Art Magic," belonged to this society.

"By One Who Knows," in "Occultism Defined" from *The Two Worlds*, 18 November 1887, pp. 3-5.

Never understood by those around me, it was only in after years and when I became called and associated with a secret society of Occultists and attended their sessions in London as one of their clairvoyant and magnetic subjects, that I myself began to comprehend why a young girl fairly educated, and blessed with many advantages, should be branded with such peculiarities of disposition as must inevitably shut her off from all companionship with children of her own age and standing.

The society of Occultists to whom I can now only allude, and who are named in "Ghost-Land" as the "Orphic Circle," obtained knowledge (by means I am not at liberty to mention) of those persons whose associations they desired.

None of the members were known as such outside their circles, the existence of the society was undreamed of, and those whom they chose to affiliate with they knew of and called. I having been thus favoured obtained a clue to my own exceptional early experiences, which the subsequent developments of Spiritualism stamped as natural Seership.

Emma Hardinge Britten, *Autobiography* (1900)

Issue

Emma Hardinge Britten alleged, in various forums during her lifetime (and in the text that became her posthumous *Autobiography*), that an English occult group she referred to as the Orphic Circle existed in England in the 1830s and/or 1840s, and that she was a member of this group.

Did such a group exist?

Are Emma's claims plausible?

Hypotheses

1. The Orphic Circle was a loose-knit community of occult practitioners, with shifting membership and disciplinary focus, that operated in one form or another from the 1820s until at least the mid-1850s, primarily in London.
2. The name 'Orphic Circle' was never used by the members of the community to describe themselves or their gatherings. The 'Orphic Circle' was in no sense a formal organization; it was a social network.
3. The initial incarnation of the circle was more formal, and referred to itself as the Mercurii in public. It formed itself around John Varley the elder¹ (1778-1842), Robert Cross Smith ("Raphael") (1795-1832), Richard James Morrison ("Zadkiel") (1795-1874), Thomas Oxley (1807-1837) and others,² was initially a mutual aid society for practicing astrologers³, and was as much interested in the exchange and discussion of rare manuscript material on occult topics as it was in practical occultism.
4. Richard Morrison - who was (a) socially mobile (unlike other practicing astrologers of his time) and (b) a polymath, introduced the use of clairvoyants⁴, and the practice of skrying, into the circle's activities. On the death of Robert Cross Smith, Morrison

¹ To distinguish him from his grandson, John Varley the younger, also a watercolorist, and a early and serious member of the Theosophical Society.

² C.f., Owen Davies. *Witchcraft Magic and Culture 1736-1851*. p. 238 and Josceyln Godwin's *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Chapter Six.

³ Emma's reference to her early experiences with the occult as "a little dabbling in astrology" may therefore be -- in her typical fashion -- an oblique reference to the Mercurii rather than a throw-away line. It may also be the original of the gypsy material in *Ghost Land*.

⁴ See the curator's blog entry entitled "A Trout In The Milk" at http://www.ehbritten.org/blog/2009_03_01_archive.html for an example of a periodical (a) edited by E.L. Blanchard (b) containing a transcription of a Mercurii session led by Morrison featuring (c) the use of a clairvoyante for remote viewing.

took control of the Mercurii's activities, and it is through his social connections that people who were not practicing astrologers became members of the circle.

5. The (a) introduction of members into the Mercurii circle who were not practicing, working astrologists, whose interests lay elsewhere within the occult sciences and who were of different social class than the founding members, combined with (b) the death of Varley, Cross, and others moved the circle's center of gravity away from astrology and related divination-oriented practices, and into areas more closely aligned with mesmerism and modern spiritualism, as well as with the broad set of practices grouped under the heading "Rosicrucian" as that term was understood in Victorian culture.
6. Frederick Hockley (1808-1880) became a member of the circle, episodically, after going to work for John Denley (?-1840?), the book dealer. Hockley injected much of the "Rosicrucian" and spirit communications thought into the group, though it is clear that R. C. Smith and Francis Barrett (1770?-1830?) were also interested in this sort of material. It seems plain that most of Hockley's practical occult work was done solo, and that he was not by nature a joiner, so his involvement with the circle during its transition from astrology to occult topics was peripheral.
7. Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873) was brought into the circle by John Varley the Elder some time in the 1830s, originally based on Lytton's long association with Varley, and Bulwer Lytton's interest in geomancy and the occult generally. Bulwer Lytton largely took control of the circle's activities after Varley's death, in partnership with Morrison, and remained involved with the circle until the mid- to late 1840s, when his social position made it increasingly risky for him to associate with what were perceived to be fringe social elements. He was always careful not to advertise his involvement with the circle (giving Rosina Bulwer Lytton, for example, nothing to accuse him of on this score).
8. Bulwer Lytton and John Varley bridged the circle's network into the social network surrounding Marguerite Countess Blessington (1789-1849) at Gore House. Varley was the Gore House Circle's resident astrologer, and Bulwer Lytton an intimate friend of the Countess Blessington. Varley and Bulwer Lytton connect Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), John Forster (1812-1876), Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Chauncy Hare Townshend (1798-1868) -- all members of the Gore House Circle -- to the Orphic Circle, at one remove. Dickens, Forster and Townshend were, as is well known, committed believers in mesmeric science.
9. When Edward Bulwer Lytton was actively directing the circle's activities, and in possession of Craven Cottage (c1840-46), meetings of the Circle took place there, and it is Craven Cottage that serves as the backdrop for Circle events described in *Ghost Land*.
10. Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) was brought into the circle by John Varley, and remained involved with the circle during his brief period at Oxford (1840-42). He

remained involved with Orphic Circle figures, particularly Morrison, on his return to England, but was on the periphery of the circle from 1860 onwards, as his primary interests and social connections lay elsewhere in the esoteric domain (see Richard Monckton Milnes, and the Cannibal Club).

11. Philip Henry Stanhope (1871-1855) was a member of the circle, through his connections with the Varley family, with Hockley, and with Bulwer Lytton. Stanhope was an unabashed practicing skryer, fond of staging social 'mornings' in which people -- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, among others -- were introduced to the practice by communing with "the spirits of the sun" as seen in Stanhope's crystal, and equally fond of 'outing' prominent figures who were, in private, occult practitioners but who were unwilling to admit such in public. Philip Henry Stanhope, like Hockley, was nomadic, and was of course for some of the period under discussion here in Europe, and thoroughly enmeshed in the Kaspar Hauser scandal, which is largely what he is remembered for today. Additionally, it seems clear from what information we have about his father Charles Stanhope (1753-1816) that Philip Henry Stanhope's relationship with the Varleys was one of uneasy intimacy. Samuel Varley (1744-1828) was John Varley the elder's uncle, and was Charles Stanhope's partner, for many years, in Stanhope's various mechanical and chemical pursuits; Samuel Varley was bequeathed 1000 pounds and a large body of equipment and instruments in Charles Stanhope's will; Philip Henry grew up in close proximity to John and Cornelius Varley (1781-1873) on Charles Stanhope's estate; it may be that John Varley the elder's father, Richard (?-?), was Philip Henry's tutor for a time; Philip Henry Stanhope saw the Varleys generally, and Samuel Varley specifically, as a significant financial drain on his inheritance, grumbling at the time his father's will was proved that he would have been in much better shape, financially, had Samuel Varley not pandered to his father's weakness for experimentation and invention.
12. Edward Lyman Blanchard (1820-1889), the literary jobber, editor and chronicler, was involved with both the Mercurii (as the editor of various astrological magazines in the 1840s), with Bulwer Lytton (as a social companion), and the Orphic Circle.⁵

⁵ E. L. Blanchard was not the only nomadic figure crossing between dramatic and occult circles in this period. Hargrave Jennings, who is cited as a (plagiarized) source of Emma's materials by Olcott and others, was the backstage manager of the Covent Garden theatre for many years. He and Blanchard knew one another.

13. Sir Charles Wyke⁶ (1815-1897) the British diplomat was involved, from time to time, in the activities of the circle, having been brought into the circle by Edward Bulwer Lytton, whom he knew in political life. Wyke was outspoken, in his later years, about his involvement with the circle, and has left us (through third parties) descriptions of what may be the Circle's practices, in summary fashion at least.⁷
14. Richard Monckton Milnes (1809-1885) was aware of the existence of the circle, through his close relationships with the de Bunsens, with Burton, and with Bulwer-Lytton, but was not himself a member. Milnes is an important gateway node to other outre social networks of the period, in particular the Cannibal Club circle, in which later public Masonic and Rosicrucian figures would claim membership.
15. Emma Hardinge Britten (as Emma Floyd) was brought into the circle as a *clairvoyante subject* (that is, as a research tool) (a) by Edward Bulwer Lytton or by John Varley the Elder, (b) by Chauncy Hare Townshend, or (c) by R.J. Morrison. Her introduction occurred in the 1838-1842 period, as Emma's articles to Thomas Welsh expired, and Emma began to transition her career from musical performance to stage acting.
16. If it was Bulwer-Lytton or John Varley the elder who bright Emma into the Circle, that person who met her in the Blessington circle at Gore House, where her clairvoyance was put on display, or where her clairvoyance was disclosed while she was performing, as a pianist, for the Gore House Circle.
17. If it was Chauncy Hare Townshend who brought Emma into the Circle, he did so after discovering her clairvoyante per se, directly, through Charles Dickens, or through Townshend's close friend and executor, Thomas Helmore. Emma's clairvoyance was apparently well-known in musical circles, and Thomas Helmore⁸ would have known of Emma's clairvoyance through his friendship with Thomas Welsh, Emma's employer.

⁶ Charles Lennox Wyke is a pivotal connective figure in this network, particularly at the open boundary between occult practice and public diplomacy. He knew the Barings, Monckton Milnes, Bulwer Lytton, Disraeli, Stanhope and other figures well, as far as I have been able to determine. Aside from his career as a diplomat, little has been written about him and I have been unable to locate his papers. Wyke was, however, in and around London during two periods of a career otherwise spent largely out of the country: 1838-1845, and 1860-1866. Additionally, Wyke is on record as claiming that he was present, with Bulwer Lytton, when Eliphas Levi performed the Ritual of Conjunction to raise Apollonius of Tyana on the roof of the Pantheon department store in London in 1854. This event and Levi's time in London more generally are of interest, as we have it on A.E. Waite's authority that Levi was a member of a London-based occult circle during this period, was expelled from that circle for revealing its secrets (see, for example, Richard Cavendish's *The Black Arts*, p. 29.), and was initially lured into performing the Rite of Conjunction by an unnamed female "adept" of Bulwer Lytton's circle. Who might she be?

⁷ Wyke's willingness to discuss his involvement in the circle, and to subject his subordinates in the diplomatic corps to demonstrations of skyring and other practices makes me hopeful that Wyke's papers, if they can be found intact, will contain important material on the Circle, its membership and its practices.

⁸ Both were members of the Chapel Royal, which Helmore directed for many years.

18. If it was Morrison who brought Emma into the Circle, how he met her is as yet unknown, but it is possible that Morrison met Emma through E. L. Blanchard, who would have known Emma through Emma's magazine work⁹ (under the pseudonym Ernest Reinhold).
19. Emma formed several relationships as a result of her membership in the Circle: (a) she was for a period of time a familiar, and perhaps a mistress, of Edward Bulwer Lytton, who may have been the original of the "member of Parliament" for whom Emma claimed to act as "amanuensis"¹⁰ in matters involving "state secrets" ; (b) she was a correspondent of, and possibly for a period of time a mistress of, Charles Dickens, who may be the original of the "baffled sensualist" Emma discusses in her autobiography.

⁹ We believe (but have not substantiated) that Emma wrote for several periodicals, including the *Court Gazette*, as Ernest Reinhold, in the late 1830s and early 1840s, on dramatic and musical topics. It also appears that E. L. Blanchard published material in the *Court Gazette*, and -- in any case -- the jobbing journalistic circles of 1840s London were sufficiently small that it seems highly probable that Blanchard and Emma knew one another.

¹⁰ The original of this veiled claim, if it has a basis in fact, could as easily have been Benjamin Disraeli, or for that matter Sir Charles Wyke (if we discard the "member of Parliament" attribute and focus on the "state secrets" assertion) who was a vice-counsel in the English diplomatic corps in 1845, and remained in diplomatic service for the rest of his working life. Wyke was a pronounced Germanophile with connections to the House of Hanover who was known to his intimates from the 1830s onward as "the Baron."